

# Editorial

## Special issue: 'Failing students'

The topic of 'failing' is emotive, in that it raises strong feelings, in those assessing failure and those experiencing being failed. The issue of how students are assessed in practice learning settings, and in particular, the issues raised by working with failing students has been the subject of limited, but consistent academic debate, both internationally, and across professions. (Parker, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013). The 'problem' of assessing students in practice learning settings, often centres around a number of key themes, namely the unpleasant task and emotional pain that can arise when working with a struggling or failing student: concern that practice educators may be unable or reluctant to fail students, concern that universities are reluctant to fail students and concerns about the limitations of a competency approach to assessing practice. The use of power and the responsibility for making the 'right' assessment also weighs heavily.

The current context, however, in terms of the on-going changes in social work education in England, prompted by the death of a young child, Baby Peter, at the hands of his carers, and the recently published Francis Report into the health care scandals in Mid Staffordshire Hospital, makes this special edition even more timely, in that protecting the public from incompetent practitioners is still necessary. These are issues that have occurred in local and specific disciplinary settings but translate across the world as we all struggle with the complexities of professional assessment in the field.

My (Finch) own interest in this area, came from a number of experiences: firstly, when I was a practising social worker, I sometimes came across practitioners, from social work and other professions, whose conduct gave great cause for concern and one wondered how they had passed their qualifying programmes and who had assessed them as competent in the placement. In my work as a university tutor, I observed the emotional distress suffered by practice educators when working with a struggling or failing social work student and at times and was struck by practice educators' apparent inability to fail students whose conduct was a concern. I also noted, practice educators who

were able to fail students in an appropriate manner and did not seem to suffer paralysing levels of distress. Alongside this I also witnessed the distress experienced by students who were not managing the demands of placement and also noted a concerning practice by both practice educators and university tutors of giving students the 'benefit of the doubt' – a phenomena highlighted by Brandon and Davies in 1979!.

I was fortunate enough to be able to explore this topic in depth in my doctoral studies (Finch, 2010) which focused on why the experience of working with a struggling or failing student seemed so hard and emotionally painful for practice educators to the point, where it seemed, that students were not being failed despite strong evidence of lack of competence. There are many facets however to the debates and questions that abound in this area, and these issues appear to be relevant to all professions where there is period of assessed learning in the field, for example, nursing, occupational therapy, teaching, counselling and psychotherapy to name but a few.

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This special edition came about at the 9th International Practice Teaching Conference, held in Bournemouth, UK, in 2011. At this conference, I presented one aspect of my doctoral studies, namely, the process of internalisation that seemed to offer one explanation as to why practice educators appeared to find it difficult to fail students in practice learning settings. Another presentation by Ann Anka and Alberto Poletti, focused on the experience of failing a placement from a student perspective and Jonathan Parker and Sara Ashencean Crabtree explored the issue of men disproportionately failing social work programmes, drawing on my (Parker) own earlier work concerning the perceptions of students experiencing the processes of failure (Parker, 2010). The subsequent discussions these presentations raised were lively and the idea of a special themed edition soon emerged.

This bumper special edition starts with a paper written by the Consensus Writing Group, which is composed of users of both social services and health services. This paper sets out very starkly why students or trainees should not pass if they do not meet appropriate standards and documents what can happen when the students become qualified practitioners. The paper articulates both anger and frustration towards universities and assessors who appear to give struggling or failing students 'the benefits' of the doubt. Whilst not a traditional

academic paper, it feels important to include the views of those who use services and adds a further rationale as to why there was a need for a special edition. This paper sets the tone for this edition of the journal and reminds us why these debates are so important, why robust gate keeping and assessment practice needs to be adopted by us all and why further research in this area is required.

The second paper, by Alberto Poletti and Ann Anka, based on the presentation given at the 2011 conference that inspired this special edition, explores how social work students experienced failing their placement. The paper raises the range of emotions the failing students' experienced included, powerlessness and fear of reprisal. The paper utilises the work of Bourdieu to contextualise the findings and argues for the need for practice educators to develop *pedagogic habitus* as well as social and emotional competence.

The next paper, by Kathy Duffy, explores the experiences of mentors working with a struggling or failing nursing student and offers an overview with of the existing literature in the field. The paper identified the challenges in working with a struggling or failing nursing student and offers some practical strategies.

Joanna Rawles in her paper, explores social work practice educators' relationships with universities, which at times, appear to be fraught and complex. These tensions emerged when working with a failing or struggling student. Of concern, were the reports of some practice educators that they ceased to offer placements in light of these negative experiences and poor relations with the university. Rawles raises the important question how far the university and practice agencies have the same focus in relation to students.

Continuing with this theme of relationships between the universities and the agencies, Jason Schaub and Roger Dalrymple's paper explored social work practice educators' experiences of working with struggling or failing students. Their study starkly reveals the unpleasant emotional responses that may emerge when working with struggling or failing students in practice learning settings. The study theories this phenomena further, and utilises a Foucauldian notion of *Panopticism* to explore why practice educators may not be able to address issues of concerns with students – in this way perhaps mirroring concerns about students poor communication skills.

Writing from a Canadian social work perspective, Jeanette Robertson's paper explores the findings from a study of field work co-coordinators

that explored their distinct role, especially when issues of failing students and professional suitability arose. The notion of gate keeping is thus critically explored and Robertson suggests some ways forward whilst maintaining a fair, transparent and anti-discriminatory approach to the task of assessing professional suitability and ensuring gate keeping practice is robust and rigorous.

The next paper by Graeme Simpson and Ani Murr, critically explores narratives of failure, in relation to the portfolio, a commonly used assessment method in social work education in the UK. The paper raises the issue about managing the distinctions between a failed student and a not yet competent student.

The last paper – by Stuart Eno and Judy Kerr – offers a fresh look at some of the themes that have emerged from these preceding papers. In particular, the paper critically explores the failing to fail notion, and offers instead a framework for considering a good fail. This reconstruction of the phenomena – from something problematic to something positive suggests new possibilities for all stakeholders.

Linking all these papers together however, is a concern that some students may well be being passed as competent when there might be evidence to suggest otherwise. What also emerge are the complexities of the debates and practice of assessing professionals in the field and within the academy alongside the potential for prejudices and discrimination that fail those who should not be failed. What we all perhaps need to work towards, is the ‘good failure’.

**Jo Finch & Jonathan Parker**

## **Bibliography**

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